

Massimo Faggioli: From the Vatican Secret Archives to St. Thomas Classrooms

👤 [Jim Winterer '71 : Photos by Mark Brown](#)
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How does an assistant professor of theology at the University of St. Thomas become the go-to quote on all things Vatican in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Chicago Sun-Times and Tribune, National Catholic Reporter, The Washington Post, and religious and mainstream newspapers in Italy, France, Germany, Great Britain, Canada, Brazil and Argentina?

Over the past two years, those are some of the publications, along with radio and television stations here and abroad, that have turned to Dr. Massimo Faggioli for help in understanding what's going on in the Catholic Church, especially when it comes to events surrounding the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI and the election and early papal career of Pope Francis.

It was an unexpected turn of events for the 44-year-old theologian, political scientist and church historian; Faggioli rarely had been interviewed by anyone

about anything prior to Pope Benedict's unusual resignation in early 2013. But by the end of that year he had given 70 interviews, and was on track to give at least that many in 2014.

This brief anecdote offers some insight into how he has become a trusted resource for reporters covering the great changes afoot in the Catholic Church: Two years ago a Twin Cities newspaper reporter, working on an article about the papal transition, called a prominent theologian at an East Coast university for an interview. "You don't need to speak to me," the theologian told the Minnesota reporter. "You have one of the best papal experts you'll find anywhere right in your own backyard. His name is Massimo Faggioli and you should call him."

Faggioli's knowledge of church history runs deep and was hard won. His theological apprenticeship included more than a decade of pouring over historical documents – often for 70 hours a week – in some of Europe's greatest archives.

A native of the northern Italy city of Ferrara, Faggioli is the son of a second-generation physician and an artist mother. By the time he graduated from high school in 1989, he had studied two years of English and five each of Latin and Greek. "Those were very hard for a 13-year-old," he recalled, "but by the end we were reading the classics in their original languages."

As a teenager, he was given the opportunity "to breathe in the last two decades of the Cold War in Europe," including the fall of the Berlin Wall, and traveled throughout northern, central and eastern Europe. His family often spent summers in France, where he picked up his fifth language, French.

He attended public schools (there aren't many Catholic schools in Italy, he says, and the ones they have aren't considered top notch). While his grades were fine, he admits: "I wasn't one of the best students in all subjects. I did well in classes I was interested in, but that didn't include math." He enjoyed soccer, tennis, basketball and handball, and at 14 he was suspended for one day from school for an incident that involved, as he put it, "a balloon with water."

Faggioli credits his early interest in theology, in part, to the Boy Scouts program in Italy. "Scouting in Italy is different than in the United States," he explained. "In Italy it is more focused on personal development and spiritual formation and not as much on outdoor-type skills. In 1989 I was responsible for leading a Boy Scout faith-formation program, and I thought I should learn more about it."

During his undergraduate years, Faggioli continued to live at home in Ferrara while he studied political science (and his sixth language, Spanish) at the University of Bologna. "My hometown is something like the Twin Cities, because it mostly is flat and has a large river. But unlike Minnesota, there you are surrounded everywhere by many ancient and historic structures. The University of Bologna was founded in 1088 and I don't know how old my classrooms were, but they were very old and not fancy at all. It's not like St. Thomas, and sometimes the classrooms could be quite cold."

While the University of Bologna doesn't have some of the amenities found on the St. Thomas campus, public education in Italy is free, even at the great universities. "And if you are accepted into a doctoral program, you don't pay tuition, but instead receive a stipend. A doctoral

student can focus entirely on research. It was a great gift. I appreciated it very much,” he said.

In addition to his coursework in political science, Faggioli also took classes from a scholar who would become an important mentor, Giuseppe Alberigo, director of the Bologna-based John XXIII Foundation for Religious Studies.

After graduating from the University of Bologna in 1994, Faggioli spent a year in the Italian military, and in 1996 was accepted at the John XXIII Foundation. Regarded as Europe’s leading school for training church historians, it would be his second home for the next 12 years.

During his tenure there he was a Ph.D. student of religious history, a part-time instructor, archival researcher, and something of an apprentice to many of Italy’s and Europe’s most respected theologians. It’s also where he learned German, his seventh language and one critical for studying many church documents.

“It was a very tough school, very selective,” he recalled. “We studied six days a week, sometimes seven days a week, for many hours every day, and many of my fellow students did not make it all the way through. It was a real privilege to be there. We had classes, gathered in seminars, wrote and exchanged papers, and we got to visit and exchange ideas daily with our mentors and professors. It was very hierarchical but at the same time very collegial.”

It was during those years that the John XXIII Foundation organized and published one of the definitive histories of the Second Vatican Council, a five-volume set published in seven languages between 1996 and 2001. “I was just a

young scholar then, but I did what you might call backstage work on the books,” Faggioli said.

“It was fascinating but very challenging work. The history of Vatican II was a huge effort, and I was privileged to work with some of the best theologians and meet with many church leaders, even the pope.”

When you combine his research for the foundation’s Vatican II history project, research on the Council of Trent for his 2002 Ph.D. from the University of Turin, and later research for his journal articles and books, Faggioli spent a lot of time in the archives of Europe. A lot of time.

He became a fixture at the archives of the German Foreign Ministry in Berlin, the archives of the Catholic University in Leuven in Belgium, the Vatican Library, the Historical Archives of the Holy Office in the Vatican and especially the Vatican Secret Archives.

The Secret Archives, once the private archives of the popes, aren’t really secret in the regular sense of the word, but gaining access to them isn’t easy. “You need to have letters of recommendation from scholars already well-known to the Secret Archives officials,” Faggioli explained. “And you have to tell them exactly what it is that you want to research, and why. They don’t just let you go in there and wander around. And when you are accepted, they give you a badge and you have to go through three checkpoints to get inside. Usually only about 30 scholars are in the Secret Archives at any one time.

“When you first go to an archive it can seem overwhelming, like a maze, but soon you start finding your way. The Secret Archives, where some of the church’s most important documents are kept, is well-organized but still, no

one can tell you exactly where to find the materials you are looking for. It is up to you and you must be very focused.”

Some archives, but not all, will let you make photocopies or take photographs of the documents. The Secret Archives allows neither. “There,” he said, “you must copy the material with pen and paper, although now they allow you to copy material by typing it into laptops.

“For scholars, the archives are treasures. If you want the whole picture, you must go there. They also are a great place to exchange ideas with the community of scholars. We even have a Facebook page, called the Vatican Secret Archive Scholars. It’s a great way to exchange information and gain insight into current events.”

In addition to the host of newspaper and journal articles he has published in recent years, especially in Italy and the United States, Faggioli has written several books that have been published in English, Spanish, German and Portuguese, including *A Brief History of the New Ecclesial Movements; Vatican II: The Battle for Meaning; True Reform: Liturgy and Ecclesiology in Sacrosanctum Concillium*; and the soon-to-be-published *Pope Francis: Tradition in Transition*.

During his years at the John xxIII Foundation, he taught as an adjunct at the University of Bologna, the nearby University of Modena-Reggio Emilia and the University of Bolzano near the Austrian border. He also was a research fellow at Laval University in Quebec and later at Boston College. It was there, in 2008, that a colleague told him about an opening posted by the University of St. Thomas for a church-history professor.

“He said St. Thomas was a very good university and this would be an important opportunity. I should look into it,” he recalled. “It was perfect for me and I feel very lucky to be here. I like St. Thomas very much.”

Dr. Bernard Brady, chair of the St. Thomas Theology Department, remembers when they interviewed Faggioli for what would become his first full-time teaching position. “Massimo blew us away with his preparation,” Brady said. “He came in with full syllabi for the courses he would teach. I can’t believe how well he has fit in.”

At St. Thomas he teaches an introductory theology course as well as courses on American Catholicism, Vatican II, the church and politics, and an ecclesiology course for School of Divinity seminarians. He also co-leads “Theology 101 in Rome,” a January Term trip to Rome and the Vatican that includes a visit to the Secret Archives and the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See.

Faggioli recently has been named director of the new Institute for Catholicism and Citizenship that will be launched this spring with support from St. Thomas and Harry McNeely Jr., now in his 46th year of service on the St. Thomas Board of Trustees.

The institute will be housed in St. Thomas’ Theology Department and College of Arts and Sciences (<http://www.stthomas.edu/artsand-sciences>). Its mission is to “promote civil discourse, faithful citizenship and the common good by fostering theological insight and interdisciplinary inquiry into economic, political and social issues.”

“The new institute is an exciting opportunity and a perfect fit for St. Thomas’ mission to ‘educate students to be morally responsible leaders who think critically, act wisely and work skillfully,’”

Faggioli said. "I'm very grateful for the support from my department, Dean Terry Langan, President Julie Sullivan and Harry McNeely."



In addition to teaching and writing, Faggioli sees working with reporters as part of the job of a church historian. "And yes, at first being interviewed was a little scary. It is difficult to be simple but accurate at the same time. Sometimes that is the hardest part.

"As I tell my students, it is good to study theology because it helps you to understand world events. And to understand what is happening today, you also need to understand the history."

Two especially memorable events for him have involved Pope Francis. Faggioli was doing a live interview on the phone with Italian public radio on March 13, 2013, at the moment Francis was elected. "The station had someone inside the Vatican, who found out Francis was chosen before it was announced to the world. So during the interview, we knew just a little sooner than anyone else. It was very exciting."

The second came in September 2013 when the Jesuit magazine *America* asked Faggioli and his wife, Dr. Sarah Christopher Faggioli, to be part of a five-member team that would translate a groundbreaking, 12,000-word interview with Pope Francis.

"I think the Jesuits asked us because they knew we were following the pope closely, and had the language skills

and also the context to provide a good translation from Italian to English. We had to work fast, and we also had to keep the interview a secret. We could not say anything about it until it was published.

“It was the pope’s manifesto and a remarkable interview,” Faggioli said. “No pope had ever spoken about himself like that. It was the first concrete evidence that something new and important was happening in the Catholic Church.”

Sarah is from the United States and teaches Italian in St. Thomas’ Department of Modern and Classical Languages. They met in Italy while she was working on her doctorate in Italian literature, which she holds from the University of Chicago. In addition to their careers, Sarah and Massimo are busy raising 3-year-old Laura and an infant son, Gabriel.

“I speak Italian to them at home, and Sarah speaks to them in both languages, so they will know two languages, and who knows how many more later,” Faggioli said. The family attends the St. Louis King of France Catholic Church in downtown St. Paul, which was close to where the couple first lived when they arrived in Minnesota. After moving to a home in south Minneapolis, they’ve continued to be part of the parish.

Do they have any favorite Italian restaurants in the Twin Cities? “Yes, we like Punch Neapolitan Pizza. It is very good ... like we have in Italy.”

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